

Think Global, Write Local: Sustainability and English Composition

A Presentation to the [UC/CSU/CCC Sustainability Conference](#)

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Introduction

Ecocomposition is a new subfield in teaching English.*

I'm motivated to practise Ecocomposition by two principles, the [first](#) enunciated by David Orr in 1994: "All education is environmental education," the [second](#) by George Orwell in 1946: "When I sit down to write ..., I do

not say to myself, ‘I am going to produce a work of art’. I write ... because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing.”

An essential element of Ecocomposition is local knowledge--engagement with one’s own particular place and time. Preparation for Ecocomposition requires teachers to be interested in their surroundings—the academic institution as not an ivory tower, but rather a physical, economic and political entity within history, situated on the land and in the community.

In keeping with these principles I’ll talk about Ecocomposition locally rather than abstractly: my experience of teaching it during the last three years here at Cal Poly.

In 2005, as the environmental crisis deepened and the Sustainability movement grew, I thought I could make an impact by reaching first year students and by framing the subject matter in the context of rhetoric—that is, the power of persuasion. So I designed a section of our first quarter required English composition course and called it Writing About Place.

[English 134: Exposition—Writing about Place](#)

The class involves several [hikes](#) to beautiful and interesting places on our ten-thousand acre campus.

The sequence of assignments starts with a conversational second-hand description of the place the students came from, followed by a first-hand description of where they are now. These are succeeded by an expository narrative about one of the working landscapes on campus and a rhetorical analysis of texts presenting arguments about our places. The last assignment combines previously used techniques into an argumentative research paper about a local land use issue.

Online course materials include a style [manual](#), to which I refer when editing papers, and links to other sources of local information, many of them student-generated.

This was the first course I taught as paperless, and I’ll never go back. I use Microsoft Word’s Comment and Track-Changes functions. Most class time is spent examining organizational, grammatical and stylistic problems on papers in progress projected from my laptop.

[Paper 1—Where are you from?](#)

This prompt asks a question familiar to freshmen. They divide into pairs, interview each other, and write a description of the other person's hometown based on what they’ve learned. This encourages them to locate themselves socially as well as geographically. It also forces them to distinguish three stages of the writing process: invention, composition and revision.

Outcomes are illustrated in [collections](#) of successful papers for each assignment I publish online.

A sample:

[Saugus](#)

As more people desire to move to Saugus the open land around the town is getting smaller. Large property owners are selling their land to private developers that build housing over the former open ground. Tyler, a long time resident of Saugus, remembers a time when oak trees were plentiful and there was plenty of space to go ride his bicycle. Times have changed. The oak trees are gone; the last one was taken out only after a man tried to save it by living in it for months. ...

[Paper 2—Canyons and Mountains](#)

The second paper assignment starts with a class hike on [Cal Poly Land](#) during which students are asked to awaken their powers of observation. The prompt includes examples of descriptive narrative by Thoreau, Muir and local student writers.

Another sample:

[My New Backyard](#)

The start of our hike up Poly Mountain began with a short wooden bridge that was designed and built by past Cal Poly students. I marched on to see what was next and I was surprised with the rain's effect on the trail because I slipped in the muddy puddles in the rock steps of the trail. ... I began to be aware of dark mountains in the background sheltered by the marine layer and shadows made by the sun on the mountains contrasting with the sunbathed pastures. The ridges of the mountains hosted herds of speckled cattle, some white, some brown, and some black. These same colors now covered my muddy sketchbook. The warm morning light, accentuated Rockslide Mountain, where the blend of boulders and green trees was highlighted by the light brown rock... On more Cal Poly land, a railroad cut a path through Serrano Ranch with delicate precision.

[Paper 3—A Working Landscape](#)

The prompt for Paper #3 asks students to write an informative description of a local working landscape, suggesting sources, possible topics, and specifying audience.

Here's an excerpt from an account of one student's visit to Cal Poly's campus slaughterhouse:

[Poly Slaughter](#)

suited up in a hard hat, hair net, and apron, I studied the Four foot steel saw hanging above me , its hundreds of shiny little teeth grinning beneath a monstrous motor. Above the saw was a mass of twisting metal, weaving its way across the ceiling. ...My heart pounding, my hands clenching my notebook, I waited. The door shifted, and then began to thud on its hinges, hinting at the struggle occurring beyond it. With intensifying reverberation, the sound of the slamming door filled the room. A shot was fired ... I gazed at the rising steel door. Falling through the opening like a lump of jell-o was the steer, landing sideways, eyes wide open, hooves flailing, still moving. The butcher fired another shot into the head of the steer, a rare occurrence since one shot is usually enough. Finally the creature was dead. Immediately its leg was encased in a large metal chain, and

by this it was lifted off the ground and suspended in midair. Blood dripping from its nostrils, its tongue hanging limply from its mouth, the steer swung slightly. Its throat was slashed twice with a hefty knife forming an X. A fountain of blood spurted from the wound, and as the steer's blood drained, its tail drooped. A smell invaded my nostrils, the raw smell of meat mixed with large quantities of blood, a warm smell, intensely nauseating... .

... After an hour, I had finally begun to visualize the body before me as meat, rather than as animal. Lucky for me, because the next step of the slaughter would have been unbearable had the carcass still resembled its original state. ...

[Paper 4--Sustainable Rhetoric--Evaluating a Persuasive Argument](#)

Paper # 4 requires analysis and critique of rhetoric about stewardship of this place. The prompt includes links to schematic discussions of the components of any argument and links to readings, among them the [Talliores Declaration](#), a set of articles in the Sustainability Issue of [Moebius](#) (a journal of Cal Poly's College of Liberal Arts) and pro-con ballot arguments on a local referendum to overturn City Council approval of a huge shopping center to be built on prime Agricultural Land.

Another student response:

[Shop Till you Drop](#)

The “Pro” side uses high ranking city officials to establish its credibility, whereas the “Con” side uses numerous ... people residing in the city. Both sides seek to undermine the credibility the opposing side has acquired. The “Pro” side accuses the “Con” side of using scare tactics and not giving any solutions to the many problems [it] raises. The “Con” side says that the “Pro” side is not to be believed because they have rich backers including a corrupt developer.

[Paper 5—Contested Territory](#)

The final paper assignment, “Contested Territory,” was introduced with a field trip to one of the intriguing and controversial locations on our campus guided by a student or faculty member who works there. The task: to describe the place vividly, explain the issues associated with it, critique the arguments on both sides, and then take a position.

[“Got Milk”](#)

The Eugene and Rachel Boone Dairy Science Complex is located at the end of Mount Bishop Road past the Crops Unit and the Veterinary Unit. The unit fits snugly at the base of Bishop's peak and is home to 80 Holstein and 85 Jersey cows. ...

rBST... has revolutionized the dairy industry, yet many people feel that rBST is bad when consumed by humans, while others believe it is not. Les Ferreira, Head of the Dairy Science Department at Cal Poly states, “Cows receiving rBST have identical levels of BST in their milk when compared to cows not receiving rBST.” The Clinton Administration conducted a study on

rBST and found that there was no negative effect. The FDA agrees that rBST is not harmful, saying there is virtually no difference between milk from cows injected with rBST and cows not injected.

...After seeing both sides of the argument I believe rBST should not be banned but it should be labeled. ... the arguments against rBST cannot be ignored. rBST contains too many “what ifs,” not to mention it is harmful to cows. ... This issue is too controversial and too open to not allow people to make their own decisions.

[Styrofoam and Sustainability](#)

One day my room mate came to eat dinner with me at Vista Grande Café and wanted a waffle, but her only option was to use a Styrofoam plate. I quickly spotted the manager and asked if there were any alternatives to the Styrofoam plates seated next to the waffle makers. The manager (who wishes to remain anonymous) replied, “Honey, I’m sorry, I wish there was, but there isn’t.” She went on to explain: “the Styrofoam plates only cost about a penny each, while the paper plates cost about five or six pennies more, and here its all about cost, cost, cost.”

Bowing to continuing student pressure since this essay was written, Campus Dining has eliminated the purchase of Styrofoam at Cal Poly.

[English 145 Reasoning, Argumentation and Writing-- Issues of Sustainability with special reference to the Cal Poly Campus—Spring 2007](#)

Like millions of others, I was strongly affected by watching Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*. It convinced me to center my practice of environmental education on climate change. At the November 2006 AASHE Convention in Phoenix, I was convinced to get involved with [Focus the Nation: Global Warming Solutions](#), Eban Goodstein's effort to create a nationwide teach-in on January 31 2008 that would force candidates in the presidential primaries to seriously address the problem. Together with two students and a faculty colleague, I attended the April 2007 [organizing conference](#) in Las Vegas, and there I heard David Orr confirm that education about climate disruption trumped all other forms of environmental education.

In the interim I had put together a syllabus for [a new ecocomposition course](#) combining the global theme of climate disruption with local efforts to find solutions to it. *An Inconvenient Truth* demonstrated the power of persuasive argumentation. Its central format was a classical oration by Al Gore schematically deploying logos, pathos and ethos. A study of the film would make a good centerpiece for the standard second quarter required General Education class in writing, which is devoted to argumentation.

The growing involvement of Cal Poly people in developing the program for [Focus the Nation](#) on our campus provided both the “write local” and the “make a difference” ecocompositional emphasis of this portion of the course.

[Papers 1 and 2](#)

To promote increasing sophistication of rhetorical analysis and to develop techniques of research and critical

evaluation of sources, I assigned two papers on *An Inconvenient Truth*: an investigation of its logical, emotional and ethical appeals to the viewer, and a reevaluation of the film in light of numerous [critiques and defenses](#) accessible online.

Student responses to the assignment came from differing perspectives. Some were deeply moved as I had been. Others were put off, often reflecting their home political backgrounds.

[Politics > Environment](#)

The presentation of global warming in the film is distorted by Al Gore's feelings and personal experiences. Gore refers to his son's near-death accident and how it changed his feelings about the environment. He does this to encourage proactive behavior, when it should be the facts that ignite change. His personal feelings about global warming are only used as bait to lure the pro-Gore viewers to change their lifestyles just as he did. Gore also includes political events that strongly affected his life, such as the 2000 election. He portrays the election as unfair and admits that he was very disappointed with the outcome. By expressing these feelings he is trying to get some supportive reaction from the anti-Bush viewers.

However, the opportunity to criticize the rhetoric of the film offset these students' resistance to considering the facts that it put forward.

[Paper #4: Cal Poly Sustainability](#)

The theme of the last three weeks of the quarter focused squarely on Sustainability at Cal Poly. I assembled a [bibliography](#) of resources divided into student writings and institutional documents. Eventually, I hope, Cal Poly will maintain a central up-to-date database of such materials as a source and a destination for local research.

Student response to this assignment was gratifying in several ways. Here is the [list of topics](#) they selected or devised. The quality of both research and writing in 16 out of 25 papers was high enough to warrant online publication. In the course of one quarter, among a random selection of students who had not chosen a class on sustainability but were merely fulfilling a writing requirement, negative responses to Gore's rhetoric about global warming gave way to engagement with a range of local campus sustainability activities.

[English 145 Reasoning, Argumentation and Writing-- Issues of Sustainability with special reference to the Cal Poly Campus—Winter 2008](#)

Between Spring 2007, when I first taught "Argumentation about Sustainability," and Winter 2008, when I returned to it, this alteration of student attitudes intensified. [Empower Poly](#), the coalition of campus activist groups, expanded in membership and effectiveness.

I added a new [unit](#) to comply with a [request](#) by the local Focus the Nation organizing committee asking instructors to prepare assignments and credit for students participating in the Teach-in.

For their research papers on Cal Poly Sustainability, a number of students in this section chose to write about Focus the Nation at greater length. To round out this presentation about Think Global, Write Local, here are

excerpts from one of them:

Focusing the Fight

Following three days of smaller events ... Over four thousand students, faculty, and townspeople attended one of the many sustainability-oriented events which ranged from discussions of solutions for the climate crisis to an art show which featured artwork by “four students who drew inspiration from different aspects of the theme in order to promote sustainability” (Vincent). As the day turned to night, and the solar panels which fueled a musical performance by Blue Turtle Seduction were powered down, students left the numerous exhibits with a new appreciation for the severity of Earth’s predicament.

Although the symposium lasted only 24 hours, Focus the Nation’s message continued to resonate with Cal Poly students long after its conclusion. Veterans of the environmentalist movement felt their cause strengthened, while some global warming skeptics (myself included) were ushered into the ranks of the believers.

Conclusion

Though courses like the ones I've described will vary with local setting, these are the general approaches that worked for me:

1. Requiring students to observe with their own eyes and describe what’s going on immediately around them—in the natural world, the work world, the social, institutional and political world they inhabit.
2. Promoting writing as a form of action that can affect the world they inhabit.
3. Foregrounding my personal history of involvement in the subjects of writing and of sustainability.
4. Fostering the expression of contrary points of view, even on the issues I’m most passionate about, and resisting the temptation to use my authority as a teacher to elicit agreement.
5. Appreciating students as researchers, writers, and guest speakers, and encouraging them to listen to one another.

* See [Natural Discourse: Toward Ecocomposition](#) and in [Saving Place: An Ecocomposition Reader](#)—both by Sidney Dobrin and Christian Weisser, and [Composition and Sustainability: Teaching for Threatened Generation](#) by Derek Owens.
